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Greece

International anti-capitalist meeting in Athens

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On the initiative of “Rproject” – the coordination of left forces in Syriza: DEA, Kokkino and Apo – an international anti-capitalist meeting took place which attended by nearly 1,000 people in Athens, from 1-3 March.

Among those present were leaders of the left of Syriza (which got more than 25 per cent of the votes at the last conference of the party), trade unionists from all over Europe (including Giorgio Cremaschi, from the leadership of FIOM, the Italian Metalworkers Federation, which is part of the CGIL confederation), economists (including Michel Husson, Daniel Albaracn and Kostas Lapavitsas), delegations from the MPS in Switzerland (including Charles-Andr Udry), Sinistra Critica from Italy, Izquierda anticapitalista in the Spanish state (including Josep Maria Antentas), from Portugal, the United States (including Ahmed Shawki of the ISO) and France (activists of the NPA including Olivier Besancenot). Among those present from Greece were Christos Laskos (member of the secretariat of Syriza), Panagiotis Lafazanis (member of the secretariat of the central committee of Syriza, who is also a member of parliament, Antonis Davanellos (member of the secretariat of the central committee of Syriza and of DEA). These last two are the main coordinators of the Syriza left.

This meeting was the occasion of a very interesting discussion on the situation in Greece and in Europe, as well as on the tasks of anti-capitalists in the trade union movement, public services and the anti-fascist struggle. The meeting ended with a discussion on the Arab revolutions, introduced by Gilbert Achcar and Ahmed Shawki.

The discussion on the situation in Greece is of particular importance, not only because Greece remains the weakest link in the offensive of the ruling classes in Europe but also because the acuteness of the crisis in that country puts discussion of a series of strategic issues on the agenda.

It is not a question of erecting Greece into a model, because the content, forms and rhythms of the Greek crisis are not transferable. Nor of thinking that we can now generalize the example of Syriza throughout Europe, because we cannot grasp the uniqueness, the strength and the hope that it symbolizes without taking into account the depth of the Greek crisis. But learning from Greece and from the problems that revolutionaries are facing there is decisive in order to enrich the tactical and strategic reflection of the revolutionary forces in Europe.

The Greek collapse

Greece is experiencing a crisis from the collapse caused by the policy of austerity of the European Union and the diktats of the Troika (EU, IMF, ECB). It is marked by social destruction unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War. The country has been demolished. The popular classes are being bled dry: the official unemployment rate is nearly 30 per cent, wages have been cut by 30-40 per cent, or even more, hospitals are without medicines, which are overpriced or sold on the black market. In Athens thousands of shops have closed down. What remains of social legislation is in the process of being dismantled. The whole of southern Europe is being attacked, but on the scale of austerity-driven destruction Greece arrives at the top, ahead of Portugal and Spain. So we must take stock of the process of dislocation that Greek society and the Greek economy are experiencing. Greece is at the centre of a new confrontation between the central powers of the European Union and its periphery. Some people evoke the situation of Greece as being that of a neo-colony. Leaving formulas aside, the Greek people are experiencing the politics of the Troika as a real humiliation, which gives new strength to the national question, which risks cutting across the processes of reorganization of the Left. The questions of national sovereignty coupled with popular sovereignty are becoming decisive, hence the importance of articulating the national question and the social question

so as not to fall into nationalism. The battle of the Left must combine radicalism and internationalism. But beyond the social and economic crisis, the country is suffering political decomposition, with a crisis of political representation and a loss of legitimacy of institutions, linked to widespread corruption and a collapse of the traditional parties, in particular PASOK, which has lost millions of voters. This crisis of political decomposition is accompanied by a rise of the fascist extreme Right, embodied by the neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn.

An exceptional revolt

Despite all this, the Greek people lives, survives, resists. Social and political fatigue is making itself felt, after 29 days of national strikes since the beginning of the crisis, but the mobilization is there, with its potential, but also its difficulties. The last strike on 20 February was still very big. The trade union movement is resisting. Hard hit by the crisis, it is not growing very much. It is even retreating in some sectors that have been destroyed by the attacks of the government and the employers, but the Greek unions remain one of the important bases of the mobilization. Initiatives such as those of "indignant Greeks" have not been on the same scale as this movement in other countries, but they have made their mark on the situation. Resistance and the organization of an anti-fascist movement are decisive in the present situation in Greece. Even though initiatives such as that of a "European manifesto against the fascists of Golden Dawn" underline the importance of the battle on this terrain, there is now a race against time with the neo-Nazis, both in the working-class districts and in defense of immigrants. Beyond social struggles, it is everyday resistance and basic solidarity - food, health... - in neighborhoods, villages, families that allow the popular classes to survive.

The unique character of Syriza

It is in this context – the collapse of Greek society, a general political crisis, unceasing austerity against the popular classes, social resistance which is maintained, but which is unable to block the capitalist attacks, the growing influence of the fascists - that the present strategic discussion is taking place. You cannot understand the Syriza coalition by simply starting from the analysis of the Greek crisis.

It is the exceptional circumstances of a "thoroughgoing national crisis" which have propelled Syriza to be the first party of the Left. Its election results have increased from 4.6 per cent to 26.89 per cent! Without this national crisis, there would not have been Syriza. But its present political weight is also the result of the history of the Greek Left, of the crisis of the Communist movement, of its splintering: Synaspismos, the majority current in the coalition, comes from the Eurocommunist currents of the 1970s. It has experienced a series of internal crises and of moves to the left, under the pressure of the young generations. Syriza has also worked with the anti-globalization movement. It is therefore the product of the accumulation of a series of experiences, of debates, of frameworks of unitary action and confrontation, which have made it possible for Syriza to be the political expression of Greek social resistance. Unity played a key role in this dynamic of Syriza.

The KKE, an ultra-Stalinist party, was more organized and better implanted than Syriza, but it was characterized by a policy of dividing the workers and by a profile situating itself in the continuity of international and Greek Stalinism. It has been marginalized in recent years.

Since its last conference, Syriza has constituted itself into a party, but in fact, at this stage, it is a coalition of currents, parties and personalities. Pluralistic, it is the most unitary framework of the Greek Left, but also the object of a battle between currents which range from reformism to the revolutionary Left.

The references of many leaders of Syriza are those of the Eurocommunist incremental approach of the 1970s, of the strategic perspective of transition to socialism by gradual reforms and the transformation of the state. Currents inspired by left Eurocommunism demand the gradual transformation of institutions and the intervention of the mass movement. They oscillate between a clear rejection of austerity and the temptations of alliances or the search for agreements with sectors of the ruling classes.

The anti-capitalist or revolutionary left currents are working for a confrontation with the austerity policies in the perspective of a break with the logic of capitalism. At the last national conference, the “Left Current” and the “Left Pole” presented a separate list which obtained 25 per cent of the votes.

Although the majority of Synaspismos remains on left reformist positions, the instability of the coalition, its sensitivity to the mass movement, its ability to attract anti-austerity forces, the place occupied by the revolutionary Left within it, all this, in an exceptional environment, contributes to giving Syriza a radical role very different from the Left Front in France. There is not, in Syriza, as strong a crystallization of reformist bureaucracies such as those of the PCF, the PCE or the Greek and Portuguese Communist parties!

“The government of the lefts”

The essential strength of Syriza and its dynamic come from its radical opposition to the memoranda of the Troika, its rejection of the policies of austerity and its defence of a programme in favour of social rights, public services, the cancellation of illegitimate debts, nationalization of the banks under social control. In the present situation of acute confrontation, these demands have a transitional role. Syriza has pursued a policy of unitary proposals towards the KKE and Antarsya – who have rejected them – and has actively committed itself alongside sectors involved in struggles. Syriza is the expression of the anti-memorandum movement. It has also popularized the proposal of a government of the lefts on an anti-austerity programme, whose content is the object of debate between the left and the right wings of the coalition.

It is in this context that the discussion in the meeting was organized around the tasks involved in moving from the present mass mobilization against austerity to the building of a social and political movement to overthrow the Samaras government and establish a “government of the lefts” against austerity: a transitional government representing a break with the austerity policies of the European Union, a government of the lefts without PASOK or bourgeois forces. As Antonis Davanellos, a leader of DEA, explains, it is a question of fighting for a “government of the lefts”- Syriza, KKE, Antarsya – which “defends the popular classes” and not a “government of salvation or of national union with capitalist representatives” as defended by some leaders of Syriza in recent weeks. Seeking alliances for national reconstruction with sectors of Greek capitalism can only be opposed to a programme of defence of the interests of the popular classes. At this stage, the strength of Syriza has been to combine social resistance and the political perspective of rejection of the austerity-driven diktats of the European Union. In fact, a left government only has any meaning on such a basis: the refusal of the memoranda, the cancellation of illegitimate debts, nationalization of the banks and key sectors of the economy in order to reorganize the economy around the “elementary” social needs of the population.

In this situation of acute crisis, the struggle for the elementary demands - which are not so elementary as that, but rather vital – poses the problem of a confrontation. Because to defend employment, stop the decline in wages, refuse privatization measures, reject the diktats of the European Union, it would be necessary to finance such a policy by a different distribution of wealth and a reorganization of the economy which must involve the nationalization of the banks and of key sectors of the economy. This means preparing for a confrontation with the ruling classes and with European imperialism. Therefore these demands have a transitional character: they pose the problem of a government which can implement them and of beginning an anti-capitalist transformation in a perspective of

socialism. To go as far as possible, this perspective must rely on mobilization and social self-organization. "We must hold firm on this line", the Syriza left explained to us.

No sacrifices for the Euro!

It is also within this framework that the debate on leaving or not leaving the euro is taking place. A whole series of sectors of the Greek Left – the KKE, the dominant sectors of Antarsya, other currents of the Greek Left – have come out in favour of leaving the Euro. Leaving the euro under capitalist conditions would be tantamount to a brutal devaluation that would further worsen the situation of the working classes, without reviving, even from a capitalist point of view, the Greek economy, given the weakness of the country's exports. Syriza – and particularly its left wing – defends another point of view: they accept no sacrifice to defend the euro. The central problem is to apply an anti-austerity programme and not to give in to the blackmail or the diktats of the European Union. Emergency social measures should not be made conditional on an agreement on the euro, which means defying the EU. It is not a government of the lefts which should leave the euro but the EU that will have to take responsibility for a break, faced with a government that defends measures for the defence of the living conditions of the working classes. This will not be so easy for the EU, both from the point of view of the legal forms – in the treaties, there is no provision for the expulsion of a country – and more fundamentally, on the level of taking responsibility for the social and economic strangulation of Greece. The popular reactions in Europe and the contradictions of the ruling classes themselves can give time to a "government of the lefts," on condition that they hold firm on a line of confrontation with the EU and the Greek capitalist class. Not taking the initiative of leaving, defying the EU but being prepared for any attack. This is the tactical response of Syriza to one of the most difficult problems. There again, the pressures of the EU are considerable, the blackmail total, but for the moment, Syriza is sticking to its course.

Everything is possible!

The situation is critical. The stakes in Syriza are considerable. Nothing is decided. Political struggles are taking place or are being prepared around how to formulate this or that demand of the programme of Syriza.

The temptations of this or that leader are great but, at every stage, the popular pressure and the pressure from the rank and file of Syriza are still pushing to the left, while the pressure of the EU and the ruling classes pushes to the right. The dominant reformist orientation and the disproportion between its electoral strength and its organic weaknesses limit the capacity for action of Syriza. But in counterpoint, the unity of the radical and revolutionary Left, self-organization and social mobilization can play a very important role, especially in creating from the rejection of austerity the conditions for the first steps towards a break with the capitalist system.